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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN BELGIUM

The Van Acker Government, at first accepted somewhat tentatively, now appears to have won the confidence of the Belgian people by fulfilling the popular demand for effective and energetic action. Two events in particular have marked the end of the Government's probationary period: the 15 March announcement of increased food rations and the concurrent and virtually unanimous approval by both chambers of parliament of the Government's request for broad special powers.

The Belgians have been particularly pleased by the new food rations, which, though still insufficient, are the most ample since the defeat of 1940. The daily per capita food ration now is 1700 calories, an increase of 13 percent over February 1945. The increase has been made possible by enlarged Allied food shipments and by the success of Edgard Lalmand, the Communist Minister of Food, in tightening control over the machinery of distribution. Although the crop prospects for 1945 are uncertain, in part because of seed shortages, the domestic food problem is considered to have passed its most critical stage.

Conservative opposition to the Government has not wholly disappeared, but has been temporarily outmaneuvered on current issues. The parliamentary Right has accepted the broad outlines of the Government's program primarily because it realizes that overt opposition at present would boomerang. This conservative group, therefore, can be expected to examine critically the specific implementation of the Government's program. In certain cases, it will probably attempt to force the modification or abandonment of proposed action, as it did in the case of the special powers bill. Among the measures which the conservatives are expected to oppose are the Government's recently announced plan for the nationalization of the electric power industry and any efforts to implement the deflationary program advocated by ex-Finance Minister Gutt.

Van Acker's initial request for special powers was chiefly concerned with black market counter-measures. The right-wing Catholics and Liberals in the Senate so emasculated the bill that the Premier withdrew it. He then elected to make the issue a question of confidence in his Government and presented his case directly to the people. A revised version was introduced which, though broader in scope, included certain concessions to the opposition and was speedily approved by a landslide margin. Among the concessions were a six-month time limit and the omission of certain direct powers which the conservatives had criticized

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as by-passing judicial safeguards. Van Acker likewise promised to consult appropriate parliamentary committees before issuing decree-laws and agreed not to use his special powers in the highly controversial field of financial policy. The law, however, gives Van Acker's Government the power to act by decree-law for the "prosecution of the war, resumption of economic activity, provision of food, purge of the civil service, and the moral and material regeneration of the nation."

While the concessions facilitated the retreat of the conservative Catholic and Liberal senators who defeated Van Acker's first bid for special powers, the primary cause of this reversal was Van Acker's bid for confidence and popular support. Neither the conservative Catholics nor the Liberals were willing to take the responsibility for turning out a popular Government and risk a reduction in their prestige and following. The right-wing Catholics, Van Acker's severest critics, realized that any new Government would have been based on a coalition of left-wing forces from which they would almost certainly have been excluded.

The lead taken by the conservative Catholics in opposing the Van Acker Government has accentuated the rift between right-wing and left-wing Catholics which has been growing since Belgium's liberation. Prior to the war the Catholic Party was a coalition of groups from various economic and social levels held together by religious ties. While the conservative faction of the Party represented chiefly the big business interests of the Walloon areas, the more progressive wing (Christian Democrats) was composed chiefly of Flemish farmers and workers. The influence of the Church hierarchy, especially on the latter group, kept both factions united despite their divergent interests.

The post-liberation trend to the Left seriously undermined this unity. Three prominent Christian Democrats who advocated the unification of all leftist groups, Catholic and non-Catholic, broke away and founded a non-confessional party (*Union Democratique Belge* or UDB). One of these men, Marcel Gregoire, before the war was editor of Belgium's leading Catholic magazine and during the occupation was a prominent resistance leader. Another, Antoine Delfosse, was Minister of Information in the Government-in-exile, and the third, Paul Tschoffen, is a prewar Cabinet Minister and former chief of the Belgian Civil Affairs Mission. Despite bitter opposition from Cardinal van Roey and the leading chaplain of the influential Catholic youth movement, Canon Cardijn, the UDB appears to be gaining ground, especially in Wallonia. This disunity within Catholic ranks was exploited by Van Acker to compel regular Catholic leaders to join his Cabinet. It was likewise a factor in influencing the conservative Catholics to support the second special powers bill, and may have a moderating effect on Catholic opposition to the Government's future operations.

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Under these conditions Van Acker may not feel obliged to confine himself to the legalistic measures for combatting the black market prescribed in the special powers bill. Some uncertainty exists, however, as to what course he intends to follow with respect to the purge and the nation's financial situation, since the conservatives, moderates, and leftists all favor different solutions to these issues. The conservatives desire a modest purge and oppose deflation. The leftists support a thorough purge and generally support deflation. The moderates advocate compromise solutions acceptable to neither of the extreme groups.

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